TO STIR A CITY
Palm Sunday
March 20, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 21:1–11

"When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil."
Matthew 21:10 (NRSV)

The very point of the Passion is the conflicts of mood,
the vacillation of the will, the confusion of the sentiments,
the crowd that yells "Hosanna!" at one minute
and "Crucify" the next, and it's the same crowd.
The steadfast disciples who become within minutes
deserters and deniers are the same disciples. . . .
Jesus did not die in order to spare us the indignities of a wounded creation.
He died that we might see those wounds as our own.
He died that we might live, fully and hopefully,
not in some fantastic never-never-land,
but in some ambiguous reality of the here and now.

Peter Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

Dear God, we love the story of Palm Sunday.
Our children waving palm branches and singing their hosannas
brings tears to our eyes and a lump to our throats.
We thank you for this reminder of our Lord's day of triumph.
Remind us, even as we welcome him again, that the city turned on him and crucified him.
Startle us, O God, with the power and immediacy and relevance of your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This is probably my favorite day in the whole church year. The obvious reason is the celebration, the holy chaos as our beautiful children process into the sanctuary and fill the aisle and chancel while we sing stirring hymns.

All glory, laud, and honor
To thee, Redeemer, King!
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

It is even sweeter when some of those children are one's own grandchildren. In the life of this congregation, this is the day when we are reminded of the most amazing thing—something no one ever expected, certainly not the people who planned this building in 1910: we have children, lots of children, more children than we have space for. Before you know it a Palm Sunday sermon could turn to fund-raising and air rights and *Chicago Magazine*. But let's not go there. Instead, let's simply rejoice in the children and in the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, one day, received the hosannas of the crowd, the respect and honor and love of his people. Let us simply enjoy the thought that he entered Jerusalem, the holy city of David, and that the city was stirred.

It is my favorite day for another reason, though, and that is that it just might be the most theologically significant, most relevant, day of the year, because it is an occasion of such ambiguity and irony, and to be honest about it, life is like that. There are huge issues and questions swirling about as the little children sing hosannas and wave palm branches.

One of the oldest traditions of the church is that on this Sunday, the entire Passion narrative is read, all of it: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the plot to kill Jesus, Judas's deal to turn Jesus over to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver, the Last Supper, the betrayal and arrest, Peter's denial that he ever knew Jesus, the hasty trial, the crowd now demanding Jesus' execution, the Roman soldiers mocking and tormenting, the crucifixion, Jesus' death, his burial. All of it, and the reason is that we feel so good about the procession and the children and the palm branches, we forget what comes immediately after.

Peter Gomes, Minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard, says that he was brought up in the "let's have a parade theory of Palm Sunday, that discreet form of Protestantism that doesn't much care for the embarrassment and indignity of the cross."

We remove the Passion from Palm Sunday, Gomes says, and turn the occasion into a festive dress rehearsal for Easter, "saving the suffering for the faithful few who will come to church on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday" (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, pp. 68–69).

In her new book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes similarly, "I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the

crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking" (p.140).

It is one of our most familiar and precious stories. About midway through the accounts of his public ministry, Jesus' focus starts to shift from Galilee, his home territory, a benign area of rolling hills, grazing flocks, fishing villages lining the shores of the large freshwater lake we know as the Sea of Galilee, to Jerusalem, in Judah, in the south, the city of David, built on Mount Zion, the capital of the nation, the heart of his people's history, culture, and hopes. It doesn't seem like a great idea, frankly. A lot can happen in the city that doesn't happen elsewhere; you can get lost, stuck in traffic, shoved and jostled on the sidewalk, yelled at by protestors, assaulted on every corner by Streetwise salesmen, the homeless wanting money for a sandwich, and little boys pounding on empty paint buckets. Some of us love it—the energy, vitality, even the cacophony of noise—but I know people who live in the suburbs and haven't come into the city for years. Jesus' disciples try to persuade him not to go. When he persists, they drag their feet, follow behind reluctantly, alternatingly amazed at his courage and determination and scared to death.

He decides finally to come to the city at Passover, at the very worst, most volatile, most dangerous time. The city is full of pilgrims. They have come to observe the liberation of their people from slavery centuries before. They are full of patriotism and hopes for their liberation from their current oppressor, who happens to be Rome. Passover in Jerusalem is such a tinderbox the governor of the entire province moves his headquarters from Caesarea to the city for the duration in order to take direct charge if necessary. Supplemental military units come along. There are Roman soldiers on every corner.

It was into that dangerous, combustible arena that Jesus came—of all things, in the very manner that the prophet Zechariah had predicted that the Messiah would come: "humble and lowly is he, riding on an ass." The crowds who saw it recognized immediately what Jesus was saying and claiming. The moment of their redemption, their salvation, their freedom from the hated Roman yoke was here. Their king had come. And so they tore branches from the trees and the coats from their backs to lay in his path, and they shouted patriotic slogans, "Hosanna!" and sang patriotic songs, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" And while it may be an exaggeration to say that the whole crowded city was stirred by it, we can be sure that a demonstration like that would have gotten the attention of the authorities, both the religious authorities, who lived in dread of popular uprisings inspired by religious zealots, and the Romans,

who simply had no patience, no nuance, no sympathy at all, simply a determination to keep peace and public order.

What Jesus did next was even worse. He went to the temple, as all pilgrims did, and when he arrived, instead of purchasing a suitable animal for the prescribed sacrifice, he physically drove out of the temple the merchants and money changers, who were making a lot of money from the holiday tourist trade. The combination of entering the city in so provocative a manner and then the active assault on the religious establishment pretty much guaranteed that he would be in major trouble in a matter of days unless, of course, common sense prevailed and he beat a hasty retreat, left the city, and returned to the uncomplicated safety of Galilee, which, of course, he did not.

The distinguished Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that "religion begins in mysticism but ends in politics." It makes us a little uncomfortable, but that is precisely what happens on Palm Sunday. The gentle teacher and healer from the countryside becomes a political activist and on this day forward stamps Christian faith with a distinctly political hue. It is a topic no less controversial today than it was 2,000 years ago. We are still understandably nervous when religion becomes political. After all, we have experienced acts of violent terror being perpetrated on innocent people in the name of God. Furthermore, we live in a nation, a political system, that has thrived, and in which religion has thrived, by the careful judicial separating of state and church—none of which changes the reality that Jesus himself, in the name of God, came to the city, inserted himself into a distinctly political climate, and got himself arrested and executed not for teaching people to love one other but by making a political nuisance of himself.

Jim Wallis's current best seller, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, argues from a Christian evangelical perspective that Christianity is political, not in a partisan sense but political nonetheless. You simply cannot read the Bible and know anything about Jesus, he says, without understanding that poverty, for instance, and the environment are religious issues, that making tax cuts for the wealthy permanent while taking billions of dollars away from Medicaid, food stamps, and education does not represent the values Jesus taught and lived.

It is a peculiar set of "family values" that gets exercised about the rights of a gay or lesbian couple while taking public money away from children. Jesus, I think, would call children, how we care for them, educate them, how we plan for them—as in population planning—a values issue, a religious issue. He had a lot to say about the poor, the weak, the children. He did not have anything to say at all about sexual orientation.

There was a demonstration in our neighborhood yesterday, a protest on the second anniversary of our invasion of Iraq. The Chicago police were out in force. They did what they had to do and moved the demonstration up Oak Street to Washington Park. I watched while two men were arrested, both ministers. Beforehand, a couple from South Bend, on their way to participate, stopped in our sanctuary to pray. And I thought to myself, part of why we are here is to ask questions of value in the world. Whether or not you agree with what our nation is doing in Iraq, part of the job of the church is to ask questions and raise issues of justice and peace because Jesus did.

Looming over the drama of Palm Sunday is the shadow of a cross and the critical issue of why, in the name of God, would Jesus do what he did. Why would God, who we believe is present, incarnate, in the life of Jesus, why would God become so involved in such a messy, political, potentially violent event, an event of human pain and suffering and death?

That question takes us into deep water on Palm Sunday. One of the big issues the philosophers struggled with and argued about was not so much the existence of God, but God's relationship to humankind. Is there a connection? Does God understand us? Does God know what it is like to be a human being? Does God in any way enter into our life, share our experience? Does God laugh and rejoice like we do, suffer and weep like we do? Mostly the philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, concluded no, God does not laugh and weep. God cannot suffer and be God. God is absolute perfection, and absolute perfection is not disturbed, touched in any way. God doesn't have feelings. The philosophers even had a word for it: *apatheia,* the perfect, isolated, unfeeling, uncaring, holiness of God.

So this Christian belief of ours that God gets all mixed up in the human situation, that God lives a life like our life, while it is at the center of our belief system, was preposterous to the Greek philosophers.

The issue today comes to us as we struggle with the notion of God's relationship to human suffering and tragedy. Where was God, we asked, as the towers fell on 9/11? Where is God, the theologians asked, during the Holocaust or the tsunami, or AIDS pandemic or most recent genocide?

One of the thinkers who has been most helpful in this context is a German, Jürgen Moltmann, whose book *The Crucified God* is one of the true theological classics of our time. Moltmann remembers how the world changed for him in July 1943 when, as a 17-year-old conscript in the German army, he witnessed and survived the Allied firebombing of his hometown of Hamburg, in which civilian casualties numbered 40,000. He asked, "Where is God?" And then as a British POW, he was shown pictures of the atrocities committed by his people against the Jews in the death camps and again he asked, "Where is God in all this?" He remembers the

day when he made the connection between the cross of Christ, the suffering of God, and the suffering of innocent civilians and Jewish people in the concentration camps.

Out of that experience came a very important book and a new theology of the cross, written "after Auschwitz." "Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theater of this violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure of the world's tragedy?" he asked and concluded that it was the latter. In fact, the central Christian affirmation is that in Christ, God enters human suffering, experiences human suffering, weeps beside and with us. Taking it a step further, deeper, in the cross of Christ, Moltmann wrote, God even experienced God-forsakenness, in Jesus' plaintive and so very human cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And in the cross of Christ, God the Father experienced the searing human feeling of grief at the loss of a dear one, a dear son.

It is not adequate, Moltmann wrote, to say only that Jesus Christ died for sinners. He also died for sufferers, died for everyone who suffers or who will suffer, died for us (*The Passion for God: The Crucified God Yesterday and Today*, pp. 69–85).

We are Easter people, we Christians are, but we live in a Good Friday world. Many have said that (see Anne Lamott, p. 12). We know what it means. Easter is coming, but not until Good Friday. Innocent people suffer, suicide bombers kill civilians, precious young soldiers die, babies come with heart defects, tests come back positive, relationships sour and die, children are kidnapped and murdered—it's a Good Friday world.

Do we have to talk about the cross? Can't we just focus on the positive, uplifting parts of the story, the love and grace of God, the mercy and forgiveness, the acceptance and pardon? We'd like to; we try, frankly. But, Fred Craddock writes,

> Sooner or later somebody is going to say to you, "Then what happened to Jesus?" And when you tell them the truth, that he came to the city as a 33-year-old young idealist and stirred the city and the city turned on him and just like that put him on trial and executed him, some people are going to back away. Can't we just leave that part out? Focus on the positive? People aren't interested in a man who dies like that. It's a terrible growth strategy for the church, all that, morbid suffering and bleeding and dying.

Craddock describes a big California megachurch that told the architect for their new building, "We do not want any crosses, either outside or inside. None. We don't want anybody to think weakness or failure!"

Jesus “emptied himself,” St. Paul wrote. He “took the form of a slave, became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” In Jesus Christ, God, that is to say—remarkably—God emptied God’s self for us, to come as close as it is possible to come to us.

Fred Craddock, who is not only simply one of the best preachers but also scholar and teacher of preaching, writes with an elegant simplicity. He describes that most-common human occurrence: a child falls down and skins a knee or elbow and comes running to mother.

> The mother picks up the child and says—in the oldest myth in the world—“Let me kiss it and make it well.” . . . She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No. It was that ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. “Mother, why are you crying? I’m the one who hurt my elbow.” “Because you hurt,” the mother says, “I hurt.” That does more for the child than all the bandages and medicine in the world, just sitting in her lap.”

“What is the cross?” Craddock asks. “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt” (*Cherry Log Sermons: Why the Cross*).

Something profoundly true is happening on Palm Sunday as our Lord enters the city and with great courage and a holy intentionality lives out the last days of his life as one of us, betrayed and denied by friends, unjustly tried, suffered, died. Something tragic, but way beyond tragedy, something terrible and awesome and beautiful beyond description is happening. Something the truth of which we know in our hearts—something about love becoming vulnerable, love exposing itself to heartbreak, something about the voluntary long-suffering of any love worth the name, something C. S. Lewis meant when he said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrong and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one” (*The Four Loves,* p. 111).

Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday—this holiest of weeks in which Jesus suffers and dies—is God giving God’s own heart to the world, to you and me and every one of us.

And so whatever else you do this week, which on the surface is no different than any other week, find a way to pause and ponder and stand a while beneath the cross of Jesus and, with the faithful of all the ages, to see

> The very dying form of One
> Who suffered there for me:

And from my stricken heart with tears
Two wonders I confess:
The wonders of redeeming love
And my unworthiness.

Amen.